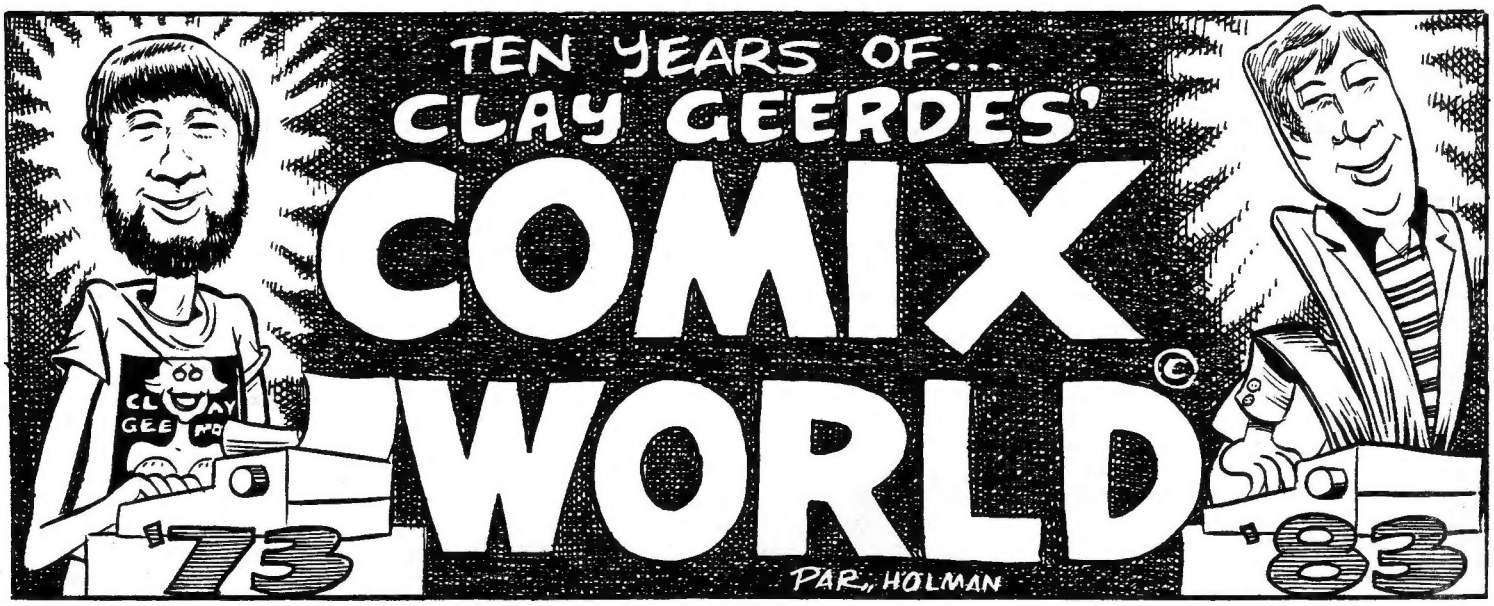

COMIX WORLD 226. November 1983. (C) Clay Geerdes. Box 7081, Berkeley, CA, 94707. All rights reserved. Logo by Par Holman.

Welcome to the 10th Anniversary issue of COMIX WORLD. A tad late--but better late than never. One sunny September California afternoon, Clay confided that he was just going to skip this milestone issue. "But, but what about Tradition?" I whispered, appalled. "Ah, to hell with tradition!" was Clay's irreverent response. The conservative in me bristled and I began ranting and raving in good old-fashioned hysterical female style. Well, the man finally relented--and the following interview, conducted by yours truly with edits by Clay, is the result. So Happy Anniversary, Clay, and many thanks to you, on behalf of all the budding creators you've supported through the years.

-- Diana Schutz

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DI: Well, Clay, as Par Holman has recently labelled you, you seem to be a "guru" in the history of alternative publishing.

CLAY: Actually, I never set out to be a guru of anything.

DI: It just happened that way...

CLAY: Well, as a teacher, I got in the habit of teaching, so my basic attitude toward everything is the attitude of a *professor*. Whether it's how to put together a comic book, write a story, how to do this or how to do that--I just seem to fall into the pattern of teaching people.

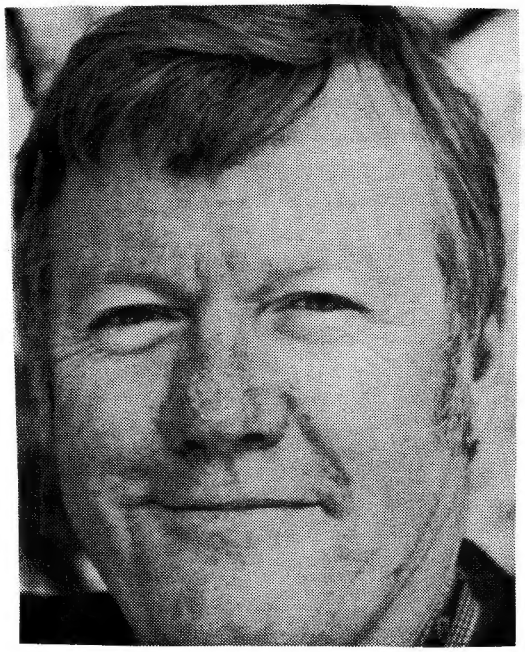
DI: Has that been the motivation behind COMIX WORLD these past ten years?

CLAY: No, no. I started the newsletter in October of 1973. We had done an underground comic convention here in Berkeley --the first one to use an underground theme. At that time there wasn't a regular forum for underground comix--that is, nobody did *regular* coverage of the comix. There were some random comments by people like Ed Ward, Paul Krassner, Dean Latimer of *The East Village Other*--every once in a while they would do a short article about underground comix, usually about Crumb and Shelton, but there was no regular coverage of underground comix. So I started COMIX WORLD as an ongoing history and commentary. There were a lot of comix coming out, then. Literally hundreds of them from all over the country. Five or six companies were still viable--the industry hadn't yet gone into a decline.

DI: What do you think accounts for the subsequent decline in sales of undergrounds?

CLAY: Saturation. People got tired of them and went on to something else. There was never a broad-based audience for underground comix in the first place. It was a small audience--most comix were 5000 to 10,000 runs, some of them 20,000 runs. Only a few of the comix were really big sellers: ZAP, FREAK BROTHERS, couple of others were nationwide sellers. You could probably attribute that to the publicity they received via the underground press. See, those cartoonists whose work was picked up and distributed through the underground press got world-wide attention and notoriety. Their strips became--for the straight world, the establishment--underground comix, and they were *the* underground cartoonists. Anybody else just got lost in the shuffle. In other words, all during that period, people were maintaining a kind of revolutionary, anti-establishment pose--you know: *us* and *them*--yet they were still allowing themselves pretty much to be defined by the *them*. They were not, in other words, defining themselves. It was Crumb who defined himself as an underground cartoonist--on the inside cover of one of the ZAPs. Now the underground press syndicate--well, at the time, if you were a member, you could print anything any other member paper had printed. So, when Crumb's HEAD COMIX appeared in *The East Village Other*, of course *The Berkeley Barb* and papers all over the country picked it up and reprinted it. The HEAD COMIX strips contained MR. NATURAL. The FREAK BROTHERS started in the *L.A. Free Press* in the summer of '68--it was picked up and reprinted all over the country. It ran in *Chicago Seed* and it ran here and there--usually without any additional payment to the artist. Oh, some artists managed to make deals, but the majority didn't get anything beyond their first basic payment. I don't know what Shelton got from Art Kunkin for FREAK BROTHERS, maybe $50. a page. I know the guys at EVO in New York--*East Village Other*--Kim Deitch and those, didn't get a hell of a lot of money for doing the work. They got experience and a few bucks and some grass--you name it--but there wasn't *much* money involved. Because it wasn't a money trip. People thought they were participating. You went out and you wrote something or you did a drawing or you took some photographs, and you shared them with the community through the medium of *The Berkeley Barb* or *The Chicago Seed* or *The Great Speckled Bird* or *The San Diego Door* and you felt like you were participating with a group of people who were like you. That attitude, of course, disappeared after the '60s; it just vanished, it was destroyed, really, by the police and the tac squads *[Tactical Police Force Units--the forerunner of S.W.A.T.]* and the National Guard and all the heavy repression that came down from the establishment on this retribalization of people--this growth of collectives and communes, which formed a network that spread across the country during the '60s. Well, it was repressed and driven out of the cities by the end of the '60s; by '69 the "hippies" had long run to Mendocino, Sonoma, and

elsewhere. They weren't going to stick around in Haight-Ashbury and get beaten up by Alioto's goon squads, right? So they had long run for the hills. Well now, today, when you talk about an underground *market*--well, you know there wasn't a market in the first place. I mean, there certainly wasn't anything comparable to the established comics trip which has evolved out of comics conventions into comics stores into the routine *structuralized* comic collecting of today. There was nothing like that in the underground: people got hold of a ZAP comic and it went all over the commune, got beat up, torn to pieces, and probably eaten by the family dog at the end! So nobody I knew was thinking about collecting underground comix. There were a handful of people, as I discovered later on, who were systematically collecting and stockpiling and hanging on to these comix, speculating on their future value, but most people just read them and threw them away. This widespread collection mania wasn't happening. Now, of course, the only people that I'm really in touch with are collectors. Through the newsletter I have maybe a handful of general readers, but most of the people I have left on my newsletter are hard-core collectors who collect everything. They collect all the undergrounds and all the newaves. So it seems the anti-materialist attitude of the '60s has evolved into an attitude that is almost purely materialist. There's very little *aesthetic* interest in comics. I see kids being trained to see comics a certain way. They're not really being trained to enjoy and appreciate comics for the subject matter and for the pleasure and the fantasy. Rather, they're being encouraged, all of them, to become little dealers, little collectors; in other words, you hear eight-year old kids now talking about how valuable X-MEN 120-something is going to be in five or six years, or they tell you about how eventually they'll probably trade their collection for a small computer or college tuition. It's a very materialistic point of view that never existed, really, before this period. It's been growing, to my knowledge, since the late '60s, and of course it's an outgrowth of the huckster rooms of the science fiction conventions. It was completely unknown to me in the early '40s when I was reading my first SUPERMAN comics.



DI: And yet that attitude has certainly kept the mainstream companies thriving. What is it about the underground market that it hasn't latched onto that?

CLAY: Never bought into it.

DI: Are you saying that the underground publishers were not professional businessmen?

CLAY: No, they weren't business-oriented in the first place--never have been. The people that are involved in publishing undergrounds fell into the business by accident. They never set out to be comic publishers. And as far as thinking in terms of collectors, they don't. They never have. They've never tried to develop, for instance, a young audience for their comix. They're not at all hip as far as publicity and promotion go. They never have been. I remember whenever Ron Turner used to have a comic out, there would be a party at The Magic Cellar in San Francisco--we used to call them "Skull parties." There used to be beer parties at Rip Off Press after a new FREAK BROTHERS would come out: everybody'd get down there and get drunk and stoned. But, as far as publicity, they were not publicity parties; they were just parties to celebrate that there was a new book out. For many years, and probably still to a great degree, there wasn't any attempt to filter books out to people who might review them and who might give them some publicity. There wasn't an attempt, in other words, to cultivate a group of people who could write about the comix. There was very little encouragement of that. Like myself, I would go by the different publishers and pick up the new comix and talk to people routinely, but I didn't get any comix in the mail. Of course, I've always gotten comix from people who were trying to be independent and wanted a free plug in my column. But as far as the presses sending me comix regularly--this did not evolve for a long time. It was in the late '70s before I can remember getting press release stuff from Ron Turner or Denis Kitchen or anybody. And that's a long time for businesses to flourish without getting a press trip together--it just didn't happen.

DI: And in that same vein, through COMIX WORLD and through other efforts of yours, you've supported a lot of people coming into the business--people who are now established in their own right. What have the returns been on that--or has this all been simply a labour of love for you?

CLAY: Well, I don't really think about it much, frankly, one way or another. It's something that I started doing and then, of course, after I had a certain number of subscribers, I pretty well had to keep on doing it for the subscribers. And I've always had the conflicts that everyone has when they get into publishing: on the one hand, you want to help certain people that are trying to get started--maybe you like certain artwork, certain books, so you want to help these people. You see certain things happening and you say "Well, this is really great; I'd like to see this survive. I'd like to see it go on." But then what you do is you learn more about the people involved--you may discover, for instance, that they're not going to make it, and you know they're not going to make it because you can see that what they're doing is not commercially viable, so they're not going to survive economically. And you don't want to say "Look, you're wasting your time. Why don't you just forget it?" You don't want to say that, because by doing that, you're kind of stifling creativity, right? You're kind of stepping on somebody. So instead you say "Hey, that's great, man, go ahead, do it, publish it, get it out there, let's see what happens." When you already know what's going to happen, because you know the business. But see, they don't know the business, so you have this kind of problem. Well, my conflict with it has always been: I might like somebody's art and I might not like the person at all, when I meet them personally. They might not like me. Now we have a problem, because I might still like the artwork, but now I don't like this person. You know, I've met somebody and I don't really get along with them and I don't like them and I don't like the way they act toward me, I don't like their attitude toward *my* work, so then I tend to get in this situation that we all get in when we're writers, where you like the material but you don't like the person producing the material. You just have to deal with the conflict. In my newsletter, I've always mentioned everything that came out, whether I liked the people doing it or not. I've just tried to stay out of it personally...

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Thus ends the first part of this interview. In the next issue of COMIX WORLD, Clay continues with more wry commentary on the comix industry in general and talks about his current interest in newave comix. Stay tuned.